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1983 Oscar Peterson makes his first festival appearance. Free outdoor shows become more commonplace.

1984 As the festival's reputation begins to spread, Astor Piazzolla makes his first North American visit. The Argentinian musician and his four-piece backup band bring jazz and classical elements to the dance rhythms of tango.

1985 Guitarist Stanley Jordan, only 24, redefines the art of soloing before a sold-out crowd at the Spectrum.

1986 The festival begins to include some of the Ste. Catherine St. turf we now take for granted. The seventh edition proves that not every moment can be warm and fuzzy: a curmudgeonly Van Morrison delights some, disappoints others at Place des Arts – and has yet to return to Montreal. Chet Baker, waging unsuccessful war against heroin addiction, struggles to stay awake on stage – to the point where Paul Bley asks him to leave. Two years later, Baker is dead.

1987 The festival says goodbye to the First Lady of Song: a frail Ella Fitzgerald makes her final appearance, closing the eighth edition with a sold-out show. Festival attendance reaches half a million.

1988 Another giant takes that final festival bow: a relatively amiable Miles Davis, making his fourth appearance, plays electric jazz-pop fusion to a sold-out crowd at Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier. He will return for three winter shows in 1990 – the year before his death.

COURTESY OF THE MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

Oscar Peterson combined the blazing speed of his hero Art Tatum with Liszt-like classical rigour.

JACQUES NUMCH AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Keith Jarrett returns to the festival after a decade-long absence.

COURTESY OF THE MONTREAL INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL

Brad Mehldau was impressed by Peterson and Jarrett's revolutionary playing.

Three trios, three generations

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
THE GAZETTE

Piano masters Oscar Peterson, 78, Keith Jarrett, 59, and Brad Mehldau, 33, are connected by talent and inspiration

Three generations of piano-trio masters grace this year's jazz festival – Oscar Peterson (age 78), Keith Jarrett (59) and Brad Mehldau (33) – and the serendipitous ways of jazz history reveal connections between the inspirations for their instantly recognizable approaches.

They were child prodigies, weaned on classics, who gave new meanings to swing in the midst of intense improvisation. Peterson, growing up in Little Burgundy, combined the blazing speed of his hero Art Tatum – the first major piano improvisor of the 1930s and '40s ("After me, you're next," Tatum later told him) – with the Liszt-like classical rigour that gave his devotion to swing an attack as precise as it was relentless. His legendary late-1940s stint at the old Alberta Lounge (where the Château Champlain hotel now stands) gave locals the chance to discover mind-boggling trio dynamics at a time when they were relatively new.

Decades later, Peterson became the first jazz pianist to impress 11-year-old Mehldau, who had started out on a diet of virtuosi like Horowitz. Peterson had the chops he could relate to, but "was playing a completely different kind of music," Mehldau recalled years ago. "That kind of roped me in with jazz, to sort of know that it was possible to do that on the piano."

Soon these realizations were expanded, when he heard Jarrett's revolutionary 1970s solo recordings (such as the multi-million selling Koln Concert), works whose rampant genre-blending – jazz, folk, classical, balladry, free – had an almost mystical influence on improvisational possibilities for the baby boomers and Gen Xers alike. (It's worth noting Jarrett had been influenced by Paul Bley, who took over Peterson's chair at the Alberta after the latter's discovery by Verve Records founder Norman Granz.)

Jarrett plays the role of enigmatic seer to the hilt, but he's got the vision and critical chops to back up the high-toned talk. He insists on keeping his mind clear of pre-ordained thoughts and moods when embarking on the unknown, the better to let the music find him, and vice versa.

"When you listen to this music, you will know exactly as much as we knew about the next moment. Your suspense while listening was shared by us at the moment of creation. The only difference between you – the listener – and the trio is that we had to physically jump towards the unknown ... None of us can hold onto our best moments. That's what makes them so good. And none of us, not even the musicians, can make the music go somewhere and stay there indefinitely. Always Let Me Go (a live double CD from 2002) is a good title, but it is an even better description of free playing."

Jarrett and Mehldau both wax eloquent on the mysteries and philosophies of music in passionately thoughtful – or pretentious, some critics carp – liner notes, essays and interviews.

The meaning of music? No problemo for Mehldau: "The truism that The essence of music is unexplainable in words' is self contradictory. The speaker who utters those words is, after all, giving a kind of explanation. The statement seems to acknowledge the unresolvable aspect that's always inherent in an understanding of music, but simultaneously forces a resolution. The task of this truism is often to blow the whistle on a discussion that has grown futile, or to call one off ahead of time, admonishing us that it is pointless."

Of course, to Mehldau it is not pointless, as he spews thousands of words reproduced in tiny print on a series of albums subtitled, natch, The Art of the Trio. (They are best viewed on his Web site: bradmehldau.com)

Jarrett's take on the connection of Bach (whom he's recorded) to improvisation? "I don't see how you can play Bach and not know how to improvise. You are missing a gigantic link – the way the notes follow the other notes ... When you're an improviser there's a certain shimmer to the motion of things. It's a dance. If you get out of the dance, you lose track of what it is you're doing. Things have a pulse. Bach as an improviser: how does he know what will be next if he's improvising? He doesn't. He's just playing, one thing to the next thing. And that becomes a dance."

Jarrett returns to the festival after a decade-long absence, still battling with chronic fatigue syndrome (diagnosed in 1996), a cruel disease for such an indefatigable improviser. He emerged with a lighter, more economical touch after his return to the stage four years ago. He arrives with his trio of over 20 years, drummer Jack DeJohnette and bassist Gary Peacock; hailed for exploring the unknown in the most familiar standards, the trio also added free-form to his arsenal in the CDs Inside Out and Always Let Me Go, often to exhilarating results.

Meanwhile, a stroke about a decade ago severely diminished Peterson's left hand abilities. This required a reinvention of his singular style, a looser approach that leans more on the blues. The gutsy retooling is at the heart of A Night in Vienna, released on CD and DVD this past week; it's a sentimental return to the Verve label, where he was virtually the "house pianist" for numerous albums that put jazz in the mainstream in the 1950s.

Finally, it's been said that Gen Xers don't have much of an attention span for jazz improv, but you'd never know it at a Mehldau trio concert, with decade-long cohorts bassist Larry Grenadier and drummer Jorge Rossy. It doesn't hurt that his "weird mixture of conscious and unconscious processes" includes songs by Radiohead and Nick Drake among his reworkings of standards. Indeed, the title of his new album cleverly describes the link between familiar old songs and flights of improv: Anything Goes.

Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette perform at Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier, 175 Ste. Catherine St. W., on Thursday, July 1 at 8:30 p.m. Tickets are $52.50 to $85.50.

The Brad Mehldau Trio plays at the Gesù – Centre de créativité, 1200 Bleury St., on Saturday, July 3 at 10:30 p.m. The concert is sold out.

The Oscar Peterson Trio, with Oliver Jones opening, is at Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier, on Saturday, July 10 at 8:30 p.m. The show is also sold out.

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THE BAD BOYS OF JAZZ: LOUD AND LOVING IT

And then there is The Bad Plus, hyped as "the loudest acoustic jazz trio ever," with an attack worthy of heavy metal channeled through Rachmaninoff-like histrionics and bombast worthy of Gene Krupa. The trio, comprised of Ethan Iverson (piano), Reid Anderson (bass) and David King (drums), set the jazz world on its ear – literally – with last year's Columbia Records debut These Are The Vistas and the recent second-helping Give. Included in their repertoire are covers of Nirvana and Black Sabbath hits. Are these bad guys a gimmick or the real deal?

"I can relate to the backlash in certain (pure-jazz) quarters," said Iverson over the phone recently, "because when I hear of something terribly hyped I go, 'Uh-oh, that's probably no good.' But I will say I'm a dedicated jazz lover, as we all are, and there's never been anything the least bit anti-jazz in my feeling. I feel that everything I do is part of the jazz tradition. We're actually pretty dedicated in what we're playing."

Iverson says he realized the trio was on to something after its first gig together: "It was like, 'Boy, this really feels like we could put these energies together and really come up with a language.' That's what is really intriguing to me about jazz. I really like those groups – led by John Coltrane, Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus and Miles Davis – where not only do the musicians play great as individuals but somehow they're relating to each other. They were making this primal language together.

"I've always been fascinated by drummers and bass players. It's an indisputable fact that pianists play their greatest things as part of an organic unit. The sound of the band is not a pianist on a platform with two accompanists. It's about all the musicians playing like leaders. It is absolutely the three of us together." Loud – and proud of it.

The Bad Plus plays at the Spectrum, 318 Ste. Catherine St. W., on Monday, July 5 at 9:30 p.m. Ticket cost $32.50.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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